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THE CALIFORNIA CASUAL AND HIS REVOLT

SUMMARY

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I. THE WHEATLAND EPISODE

LABOR history, more than any other subdivision of economic history seems to be written in terms of impressive events. In August, 1913, in the hop fields of Wheatland, California, such an event took place: an unusual strike, as strange as any in the annals of western labor. Men were killed, the country side cast into hysteria, the militia called out, and the state was made to realize overnight that San Francisco unionism was not the sum total of her labor problem. California long had known that nowhere in the country was there as unionized a city as San Francisco, that wages were high even as compared with the New York building trades, that the Exposition had been built as a closed shop, and that a candidate, be it for governor, who was luke warm regarding the policies of organized labor had a remote chance of election. To Californians this for more than twenty years had been their labor question. With the dramatic entry of the hop pickers on the stage there began such a widespread and agitated discussion of the condition of the state's casual workers, that the

two years of 1913 and 1914 will be known in western labor history as the "period of the migratory worker."

The story of the Wheatland hop pickers riot is as simple as the facts of it are new and naïve in strike histories. Twenty-eight hundred pickers were camped on a treeless hill which was part of the Durst ranch, the largest single employer of agricultural labor in the state. Some were in tents, some in topless squares of sacking or with piles of straw. Eight small toilets had been erected and four days use had made them revoltingly filthy. No toilets had been allotted to women. There was no organization for sanitation, no garbage disposal. The temperature during the week of the riot had remained near 105°, and tho the wells were a mile from where the men, women and children were picking, and their bags could not be left for fear of theft of the hops, no water was sent into the fields. A lemonade wagon appeared at the end of the week, later found to be a concession granted to a cousin of the ranch owner. Local Wheatland stores were forbidden to send delivery wagons to the camp grounds. It developed in the state investigation that the owner of the ranch received half of the net profits earned by an alleged independent grocery store which had been granted the "grocery concession" and was located in the center of the camp ground.

An examination of the wage system of this ranch for both the seasons of 1912 and 1913 showed an interesting phenomenon. Each day there existed four possible wage rates. If many hop pickers had drifted in by wagon and train and foot during the previous day, and as a result an unemployed crowd hung about the check window at sunrise, then ninety cents per hundred pounds was hung up as the piece price for hop picking. If there were unemployed still desirous for work even

after this wage announcement, and a surplus hung about the window the following morning, it was the custom to lower the wages to eighty-five cents per hundred pounds. Like the immigrant at Ellis Island, the hop picker arrives at the job without a money reserve. The dictator of the wage policy of this ranch explained that if the pickers grew disgruntled at either the rate of pay or the average income and drifted away, leaving work checks uncalled for, then the wage scale would be raised to ninety-five cents or even a dollar. There had been certain days in the past, he said, when a labor exodus had forced the price to as high as \$1.10 before the workers would flow in and allow the rate to sink to a more profitable level. In order to counteract any wavering in allegiance to the job, 10 per cent of the gross wages was held out by this ranch to be paid to those who remained through the season. The ranch owner argued that this was a real bonus, because so many left before the season was out that they, the deserters, fixed the real average wage; therefore those who remained to receive the 10 per cent were paid just that amount more than the average. In a private hearing before the Governor, an attempt to establish whether a bonus should be taken from the wage fund or the profit fund was without success. Possibly this failure illustrates a certain general confusion upon the issue. To uphold this wage system it was necessary to advertise throughout California and in southern Oregon and western Nevada that everyone who applied on or before the day picking was to begin could obtain a job. It is difficult to estimate the vast number of migratory workers who make this ranch a short stopping place at some time in the five weeks of hop picking.

The pickers in August, 1913, were drawn from three sources. About a third came from California towns and

cities, men and boys who form the great class of town casuals, and the wives and children from various strata of the middle class. Another third were families from the Sierra foothills, quasi-gypsies, with carts or ramshackle wagons. The final third were the migratories, — the pure hobo, or his California Exemplar, the “fruit tramp”; Hindus; and a large party of Japanese. There was much old time California blood in this group, and even if the individuals had come upon evil economic days, their idea of personal dignity and their devotion to certain strange western “rights” had remained most positive. They began coming to Wheatland on Tuesday and by Sunday the irritation over the wage scale, the absence of water in the fields, plus the persistent heat and the increasing indignity of the camp, had resulted in mass meetings, violent talk, and a general strike.

The ranch owner, a nervous man, was harassed by the rush of work brought on by the too rapidly ripening hops, and indignant at the jeers and catcalls which greeted his appearance near the meetings of the pickers. Confused with a crisis outside his slender social philosophy, he acted true to his tradition and perhaps his type, and called on a sheriff’s posse. What industrial relationship had existed was too insecure to stand such a procedure. It disappeared entirely, leaving in control the instincts and vagaries of a mob on one hand, and great apprehension and inexperience on the other.

As if a stage had been set, the posse arrived in automobiles at the instant when the officially “wanted” strike leader was addressing a mass meeting of excited men, women and children. After a short and typical period of skirmishing and the minor and major events of arresting a person under such circumstances, a member of the posse standing outside fired a double barrelled shot gun over the heads of the crowd, “to sober them,”

as he explained it. Four men were killed, two of the posse and two of the strikers, the posse fled in their automobiles to the county seat, and all that night the roads out of Wheatland were filled with pickers leaving the camp. Eight months later two hop pickers, proven to be the leaders of the strike and its agitation, were convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to life imprisonment. Their appeal for a new trial was denied.

Dramatic because of its suddenness and the deaths, sordid in its details, in some way the episode caught and held the attention of the state. It is impossible to understand California's ensuing inspection on the subject of its peculiar labor problem without a description of the Wheatland episode. This brought the state to some degree of self-realization. The Federal Commission on Industrial Relations and the State Commission of Immigration and Housing turned their initial interest in the significance of the hop pickers riot to the problem thus dramatically introduced of the migratory worker in the west. The riot in the end served many purposes, one of which was to lend dignity to the I. W. W. in a very appreciable manner. Sympathy with Syndicalism and ultra radical theories appeared in the most unexpected places. A group of women who had been identified with the most notable agitations in the California feminist movement went from trade union to union begging for funds to defend the indicted hop pickers. It was disclosed that many trade unionists in San Francisco sympathized with Syndicalism, some going so far as to have cards in both organizations. It was disclosed in the trial that certain suspects among the hop pickers had been held in jail many weeks without being charged or given a court hearing, a record of their arrest existing only on a so-called "secret blotter." This fact, in addi-

tion to an unexplainable participation of a private detective agency in the case, was a focus for very warm opinion. The county authorities' traditional treatment of vagrants and migratory workers with "no visible means of support" gave a sickening picture, and an uncomfortable hint of a vast amount of cruelty and injustice. Any romance which the far west had thrown around a sheriff's posse was rudely stripped from the institution, and the prophecy was accepted that if the posse be the police power in any period of agricultural strikers and disorder, a large measure of dangerous inefficiency is assured. The most important result of the riot was the study of the economics of the labor field thus suddenly disclosed; and it is the results of this research to which we now turn.

II. THE CALIFORNIA CASUAL

California is a natural economic entity, insulated from the rest of the world by an ocean on the west, a desert south, and high mountains north and east. This gives a fair basis for isolating the labor problem to be considered under the present caption. The census shows the existence in the state of some 175,000 workers in the casual-using occupations. Of these, 72,157 are farm laborers "working out." A dependable estimate of the number of laborers in labor camps of the state at the time of maximum population is 75,000. The State Immigration Commission gathered statistics for 876 labor camps with a capacity of 60,813 workers. There has been a noteworthy industrial and agricultural specialization by districts in the state. Mining and the two diverse kinds of coast lumbering, *i. e.*, the Sierra pine belt and the lower lying redwood belt, have given three detached labor fields. Agricultural California today is

spotted with districts devoted to highly specialized and seasonal crops, running geographically from the oranges of the south through the walnuts of Santa Barbara, the raisins of Fresno, the artichokes of Half Moon Bay, the berries of Santa Clara, to the early peach and the olive regions of the northern Sacramento Valley. Each town is a specialist and each Chamber of Commerce a "booster club" for a single product. This nature-ordained agricultural specialization is the basic cause of the existence of the California migratory worker. Another factor important is the circumstance that California for the last five years has been the scene of more railway and highway construction than any state in the west. Thus there was added to the local casuals a new element, the middle west railway laborer, the "construction work hobo." He has transplanted his personal habits and labor psychology into western soil without western adaptation.

In 1913-14 an investigation was carried on in California which utilized schedules covering 222 typical migratory workers, and from the resulting report the following generalizations appear well-based. Nearly half (48 per cent) were native Americans. The statistics of the Chicago Municipal Lodging House for 1910-12, covering 30,888 cases, of whom 60 per cent were estimated as migratories, give the percentage of "Americans" as 53.5. Of the California number investigated 76 per cent were unmarried and 7.1 per cent had abandoned their wives. Four years of Chicago statistics show nearly 90 per cent unmarried. Of the 222, 47 per cent were under thirty years of age. A study in Chicago of 38,256 casuals in 1910-12 showed 44 per cent below thirty years of age. In California 33 per cent were between thirty and forty years of age, in Chicago, 27 per cent. Of the 30,888 examined in Chicago, 60 per

cent were unskilled; 52 per cent of the California group admitted no trade training whatsoever. Of the Chicago group, but 21 per cent had been long enough in that city to establish a legal residence. Of the 222, 73 per cent had worked at their last regular job in some locality other than the one in which they were examined. 21 per cent had had their last job outside the state. 41 per cent had been casual laborers less than six years, and 36 per cent between six and fifteen years. The per cent who admitted their intention of "floating" with no idea of looking for steady work was 67. 35 per cent left their last job voluntarily. This hints at a conclusion which finds support in all the studies of the casual, the tramp, or the vagabond: that casualty begets a labor type permanently under normal. There is today sufficient evidence from various quarters to make this grave charge against seasonal work. For instance, in Belgium the statistics of admissions in 1908 to the Wortel Beggars Depot show 1,222 committed for the first time, 435 for the second, 261 for the third, 163 for the fourth, and 717 for the fifth time or oftener.

Some of the more intimate statistics of the California group are suggestive: 22 per cent had belonged to a lodge; 29 per cent had been members of a Protestant Church, 18 per cent of the Catholic; 48 per cent gave no preference for a political party, yet 37 per cent advocated the complete destruction of the present political system. Despite the Wheatland riot and the extensive propaganda of the I. W. W. among this very labor class, but 8 per cent belonged to that organization. 41 per cent had ceased writing or maintaining any connection with relatives, and 86 per cent said no one was dependent upon them. Somewhat similar evidence is the fact that out of thirty suicides in the men's cheap lodging houses in San Francisco in the month of December,

1913, but two left behind any word as to their source or relatives. The schedule examiners reported that 74 per cent were in good or fair physical condition, and 24 per cent sick. The Chicago statistics covering 130,053 cases reported 84.8 per cent "able-bodied." 77 per cent of the 222 in California were alcoholic, and 26 per cent admitted a jail record. The Department of Education of Stanford University tested two hundred unemployed of the migratory labor class and almost an even 25 per cent were found feeble-minded. Binet tests made in 1913 by the Economic Department of Reed College, Portland, covering 107 cases taken from the unemployed army showed the percentage of feeble-minded to be 26.

A California state official of long technical experience, whose duties bring him in direct contact with the young vagrant, believes that he has the data to prove a widespread practice of homosexuality among the migratory laborers. Investigation reports of a most dependable and technical nature show that in the California lumber camps a sex perversion within the entire group is as developed and recognized as the well-known similar practice in prisons and reformatories. Often the men sent out from the employment agencies are without blankets or even sufficient clothing, and they are forced to sleep packed together for the sake of warmth. Investigations are beginning to show that there are social dangers which a group of demoralized, womenless men may engender under such conditions of greater menace than the stereotyped ill effects of insanitation and malnutrition.

III. THE LABOR CAMPS, THE LABOR TURNOVER

An investigation of the labor camps of the state was carried out in the summer of 1914 by the State Commission of Immigration and Housing under the direction of the present writer. 876 camps were examined in which at some time in the summer 60,813 men were to be housed. Of these camps 297 (34 per cent), holding 21,577 workers, were pronounced in good condition; 316 (36 per cent), housing 22,382 men, fair; and 263 (30 per cent), housing 16,854 men, were so insanitary and destitute of essentials that they were entered as bad. In this investigation "fair" was below the minimum established by the State Board of Health. Of the berry camps investigated, 68 per cent had toilets statistically noted as "filthy." The toilets were in this same condition in 37 per cent of the fruit camps, 69 per cent of the grape camps, 38 per cent of the highway camps, 52 per cent of the 135 hop camps, 42 per cent of the lumber camps (tho they could be described as permanent in many cases), 37 per cent of the mining camps, and 61 per cent of the ranch camps. The large corporation made an interesting break in this recital, for but 24 per cent of the railway camps were "filthy;" and in the oil fields, where Standard Oil and the Union Oil Company are largely in control, the percentage was 27. In 29 per cent of the construction and 25 per cent of the highway camps there were no toilets whatever. For all the 876 camps, 13 per cent had no toilets, 41 per cent maintained filthy toilets, 20.4 per cent fairly sanitary, 23.4 per cent sanitary and fly screened. Among all camps 40 per cent provided no bathing facilities at all, 39 per cent offered tubs or showers. Of the 527 labor camps using horses, 47 per cent allowed the manure to accumulate in the vicinity of the kitchen and mess tent. 35 per

cent of the kitchen and mess tents had no screens. 25 per cent of the camps had no garbage disposal, the kitchen refuse being allowed to accumulate indefinitely. It is a proverb in the health service of the two great valleys that every labor camp has its typhoid carrier. Certain fruit towns expect their ten cases of typhoid per year.

It will be seen that the camp conditions at Wheatland constituted no isolated case. The early California population was a pioneer community and their complete acceptance of individualism gave little room for social realizations. This doctrine remains the current philosophy of the country districts, and despite the statewide influence of the social legislation of the Johnson administration, the inherited psychology of the employer of casual labor remains the same.

Resistance by the worker to an employer's labor policy takes one of two forms: either an open and formal revolt, such as a strike; or an instinctive and often unconscious exercise of the "strike in detail," — simply drifting off the job. The latter phenomenon is called by the employers "undependable labor," and ideas concerning this willful unreliability constitute the layman's usual version of the California labor problem. In the light of the recent investigations it would appear that the California employer obtains the labor to whom his conditions of employment are attractive. A study first of the "strike in detail" in the state is convincing.

Statistics were obtained from the books of the Southern Pacific and Northwestern Pacific, the two systems carrying on the most important railway construction in the west. On the Northwestern Pacific, in a camp called the "Tunnel Camp," during the five months from January to May, 1914, 529 men worked 7,414 days, an average of 14 days per man. In the "Grade Camp" of

the same company adjoining the "Tunnel Camp," during the seven months from June to December, 764 men worked 7,723 days, an average of 10.1 days per man.

On the Southern Pacific, in another "Grade Camp," statistics covering March 10 to July 8 show 480 men working 4,145 days, an average of 8.6 days per man. These figures bear out the employment agency proverb that there are three crews of men connected with the job, one coming, one going, one on the job.

A big dried fruit packing firm in Fresno reported that to keep up a skilled crew of 93 men, 41 per week had to be hired throughout the season. A large ranch with a fruit season of nine weeks reported a monthly turnover of 245 per cent. One power house construction job in the Sierras gave figures showing that to maintain a force of 950, over 1,500 men a month were shipped to them.

It seems that when a laborer has earned a sum which road tradition has fixed as affluence, he quits. This sum is known as a "jungle stake," and once it is earned the hobo discipline calls upon the casual to resort to a camp under a railroad bridge or along some stream, a "jungle," as the vernacular terms it, and live upon this "stake" till it is gone. Thereupon he goes north to a new maturing crop. Weeks spent among the casuals by two investigators convince them of the wide prevalence of this custom. In the words of a report, "the sum which usage prescribes that a jungle stake should be, taken in relation to the wage in the district, fixes the casual's endurance on the job. Today between ten dollars and fifteen dollars is a proper stake." The statistics of the 222 California casuals examined show that but 29 per cent left their last job because work gave out. Taking into calculation both the tendency to drift away from a fairly permanent job, as shown by the construction work figures, and also the normal short duration of the

fruit or harvesting work, some such generalizations as the following, gathered by the investigators, seem to be dependable. The duration of a job is : —

| | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| In lumber camps..... | 15-30 days |
| “ construction work..... | 10 “ |
| “ harvesting..... | 7 “ |
| “ mining..... | 60 “ |
| “ canning..... | 30 “ |
| “ orchard work..... | 7-10 “ |

IV. WINTER UNEMPLOYMENT; THE REVOLT

California is a state of summer employment. The seasonal activity of the canneries, the state's principal industry, illustrates this fully. In August, 1909, California canneries employed 16,047; in February, but 2,781. Of the 150,000 migratory workers employed in the summer, a mass of direct and indirect information indicates that fully 100,000 face sustained winter unemployment. Driven out of the lumber and power construction camps and the mines of the Sierras by the snow, out of highway camps by the regular winter shut down, and out of agriculture by its closed winter season, with a winter's stake estimated to be on the average \$30, these tens of thousands “lie up” for from five to six months in the cities of the coast. A San Francisco canvass of the ten and fifteen cent lodging houses and the cheap hotels of the foreign quarter, made in December 1913, showed that over forty thousand were “lying up” in that city. A Los Angeles estimate gave 25,000; Sacramento showed approximately 3,000; important additions came from Stockton, Fresno, and Bakersfield. The winter of 1913 was a hard one for the lodging house man. His stake was small, and by October there were hungry men on the San Francisco streets and talk of a bread line. One of those odd creatures appeared who

inhabit the border land of labor, "General" Kelly, and in two weeks had organized an unemployed "army" whose enlistment soon reached two thousand. The recruits were a fair cross-section of the thousands of migratories lying up in the city: those who were penniless and evicted from lodging houses, the younger gentry looking for adventure, the quasi-yegg looking for disorder, the border line defectives attracted by the military form, and lastly the normal casuals weary of monotonous privation. After a few weeks the inaction caused the more restless and able to drift away. By December, through this segregation, the "army" had become a human scrap heap and the wet and disconsolate camp on a vacant lot a social caricature. With doubtful generosity the city turned over to the army a vacant building near the City Hall. Soon it became crowded and filthy beyond description. Men were lying in every shape and direction upon the floors of every passage and hallway of the house. In round numbers there were 700 men in the upper stories and over 500 in the vacant stores of the ground floor, a total of over 1,200 men.

A few weeks later the Army began its demoralized march on the national capital. It left San Francisco by ferry, landed in Oakland, was passed rapidly by armed Oaklanders through the city on to Richmond. Here the exasperated mayor organized transportation and passed the hungry legion on to Sacramento by train. This town, after a day of fruitless cogitation, descended on the camp with pick handles and fire hose, drove the army across the river, and burned the blankets and camp equipment. Guards with rifles kept the bridge. The writer had opportunity of remaining most of four days with this now broken and dispirited body of men, studying some fifty odd closely. They were willing to

talk, many being in a highly excited and uncontrolled state. Over half, either through long malnutrition and privation, or through constitutional defects, had reached an abnormal mental condition. There were defectives even among the "officers," and much of their "strategy" against the businesslike riflemen at the bridge was curiously like the scheming of small boys. The suffering and helplessness, the pitiful inefficiency of this broken mob, the bitter humor of the feeble military form to which it still clung, made the entire picture an economic cartoon. It was impossible to be there and not get a vivid impression of a class inferior, unequal, and with fewer rights than normal American tradition promises to its citizens.

Within three weeks the Army, rained on and starved out, melted away, and its members joined that restless migration into which the first spring days had stirred the lodging house population. The Army's psychology had dissolved into the larger psychology of the migratory 150,000, and its winter's experience added to that collection of strange complexes which make up the California casual's mob mind.

There is here, beyond a doubt, a great laboring population experiencing a high suppression of normal instincts and traditions. There can be no greater perversion of a desirable existence than this insecure, undernourished, wandering life, with its sordid sex expression and reckless and rare pleasures. Such a life leads to one of two consequences: either a sinking of the class to a low and hopeless level, where they become through irresponsible conduct and economic inefficiency a charge upon society; or revolt and guerilla labor warfare.

The Wheatland strike was revolt and warfare, and was engineered by the I. W. W.; and tho there were but a handful of members and a single leader at the Durst

ranch, the strike was momentous in results. The trade unions themselves had given and still give but perfunctory notice to the migratory laborer. Tho the skilled railway employees are completely unionized, their interest has not extended to the railway construction workers whose working and living conditions are utterly deplorable. California, an investigation showed, has between 4,500 and 5,000 active members of the I. W. W. Up to the Wheatland affair their energy in the west had gone into free speech fights, notably at Fresno and San Diego. Since Wheatland they have devoted themselves entirely to organizing the migratory laborer. The destructive efficiency of the I. W. W. strike tactics, that of "direct action" and sabotage, was shown in the organized hop strike of 1914, tho the strike failed. Even in the spring of 1915 barn and kiln burnings occurred in the hop fields up and down the state, — a back fire of the riots of 1913. It is not difficult to understand the light allegiance to law and order, to the sanctity of property, which is an outstanding characteristic of this group. Much of their so-called syndicalistic philosophy analyzes down to a motive of resentment. Investigators report that sabotage and "putting the machine out of business" are the topics to which the road meetings turn. The group in all its characteristics is the poorest of raw material for labor organization. Shifting, without legal residence, undernourished as a universal rule, incapable of sustained interest, with no reserve of money or energy to carry out a propaganda, they cannot put forth the very considerable energy which coöperation demands. Their numerous strikes in California have been but flashes of resentment, and when their leaders in 1914 planned a great picketing of all the hop fields of the Sacramento valley, they found that their pickets after a week of patience began to slip onto freight trains

and disappear to the south. The needed two thousand dwindled to a handful and the "great strike" flickered out. Hopes are high for the 1915 season; agitation is rife, and numerous fires to date give evidence of "direct action" already carried out on the part of the I. W. W. It remains to be seen how far the 1915 tactics of the organization will embarrass the agricultural employers of California, but the word has gone out that "no crop is to be harvested" until the indicted hop pickers, referred to in connection with the Wheatland affair, are freed.

The migratory laborers as a class are the finished product of an environment which seems cruelly efficient in turning out beings molded after all the standards society abhors. Fortunately the psychologists have made it unnecessary to explain that there is nothing wilful or personally reprehensible in the vagrancy of these vagrants. Their histories show that, starting with the long hours and dreary winters of the farms they ran away from, through their character-debasing experience with irregular industrial labor, on to the vicious economic life of the winter unemployed, their training predetermined but one outcome. Nurture has triumphed over nature, the environment has produced its type. Difficult tho organization of these people may be, a coincidence of favoring conditions may place an opportunity in the hands of a super leader. If this comes, one can be sure that California would be both very astonished and very misused.

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